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A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE ROLE OF POWER AND PRIVILEGE IN CONDUCTING INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

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STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Margaret Hegwood is currently a graduate student studying Biological/Food Process Engineering at Purdue University. Margaret has acquired significant experience working abroad in food security through internships, research, and as a graduate assistant for Purdue's Global Engineering Programs and Partnerships. Margaret aspires to use her technological background to advise domestic and international governments on critical global agriculture issues. She recently returned from four and a half months in Kenya conducting research on novel processing methods for improved food safety as a Department of Defense Boren Fellow. Upon graduation from Purdue University this summer, Margaret will be pursuing a PhD in Environmental Studies as a food technologies and food security fellow at the University of Colorado Boulder. In this article, Margaret reflects on the role of power and privilege during her interactions with international partners and how they influence the success of international projects.

INTRODUCTION

A growing number of higher education students are traveling to low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) for study abroad and service-learning opportunities. For example, between the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 academic years, the number of American students studying abroad in sub-Saharan Africa increased by 7.3% (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019). In many cases, these students traveled with one of the many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), religious institutions, or university programs that seek to partner international development efforts with higher education. Many university students return from such study abroad programs with new perspectives on cultural differences, international relations, and their own identity. Many even quote that study abroad effectively “changed their life.”

Unfortunately, while the result for student participants is often a positive experience, few programs create mechanisms that provide communities with ongoing benefits. As a result, international community partners are left with only brief and temporary assistance or in some cases, even a detrimental aftereffect (Peterson, 2016).

As a university student who has conducted research and worked abroad many times, it took me time, self-critique, and personal reflection to realize that international social work can often operate as a form of *professional imperialism* (Midgley, 1981; Thomas & Chandrasekera, 2014). Thomas and Chandrasekera eloquently use this term to describe how historical inequalities are reinforced and reiterated when a social work program is mainly focused on providing an enriching experience for students. This is not to say that well-designed programs oriented around

fair trade learning, social justice, and mutual benefit do not exist. However, these types of programs become difficult to achieve when international development researchers—particularly graduate and undergraduate students—lack awareness and understanding of power and privilege dynamics.

For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on how this phenomenon persists at an individual level, drawing from my personal experiences conducting international development research. Specifically, this work serves as a critical reflection on how power and privilege played a role during my time as a Boren Fellow in Kenya. Reflecting on these factors has made me consider many aspects of my role as a researcher in the international development space. This essay includes reflections on the legitimacy of my research, the effects on project stakeholders, and the success of the project overall.

During my time at Purdue, I have studied abroad, worked, and conducted research in over 10 different countries. This includes working in Belgium with the USDA Foreign Agricultural Service as well as conducting my graduate student research in Kenya. In addition to my own experiences living and working abroad, this paper was also inspired by my work as a graduate assistant for Purdue's Global Engineering Programs and Partnerships (GEPP) office. As a graduate assistant, I have assisted with facilitating our Shah Family Global Innovation Lab, served as a design reviewer for Engineers Without Borders, coached students during their own international experiences, and been trained to use multiple intercultural development assessment tools.

In many ways, my work with GEPP has laid the foundation for my understanding of power and privilege in the international research and study abroad environment. This foundation includes my formal training as a qualified administrator for the Intercultural Development Inventory® (IDI) and the Beliefs, Events, and Values Inventory (BEVI). In comparison to many students who study abroad, I was familiar with and had a well-developed understanding of these concepts before I left for Kenya. Yet, the limits of formal training were met during personal interactions with my community partner and friends during my time abroad. This reflection will include scenarios where I could have unintentionally exacerbated the power and privilege dynamics in the community where I lived and worked.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Before my Boren fellowship, I traveled to Kenya twice to work as a graduate student researcher and teaching

assistant for the Purdue Utility Project (PUP) team. The connections I made during those first two visits allowed me to build a robust project in partnership with the University of Eldoret for my master's thesis research. My work was funded by a U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) Boren Fellowship, which is awarded to students doing work critical to national security. My thesis research focuses on novel food processing methods for improved food safety and quality, which is a critical piece of achieving global food security. Since food inaccessibility contributes to government instability and unhealthy populations, the DoD considers work like mine critical to protecting national security.

Specifically, my research focuses on using novel processing technology to rid aflatoxins from contaminated food products. Aflatoxin, a secondary metabolite produced by mold, as seen in Figure 1, simultaneously creates economic and public health challenges. The carcinogenic nature of aflatoxin means that it is highly regulated at a global level, but these strict regulations are often left unmet by many LMICs like Kenya due to lack of financial resources. Lack of resources to test for and prevent the growth of aflatoxins leads to Kenyans unknowingly consuming foods with high levels of aflatoxins. We know that these high aflatoxin consumption rates have led to increased rates of cancer and other aflatoxin-associated diseases (Mutegi et al., 2018).

The whole of my work was completed at the University of Eldoret in Uasin Gishu County in Western Kenya. Uasin Gishu is affectionately known among Kenyans as the country's "bread basket" because of its large annual maize production. Consequently, a large portion of the population in Uasin Gishu County is engaged in the agriculture sector, whether through farming or small



Figure 1. Maize (corn) with mold growth.

agricultural businesses. Eldoret, a major town located at the center of Uasin Gishu, serves as an agricultural hub for major cereal processing companies and agricultural research. The county's vibrant agriculture sector contributes to improved incomes in comparison to neighboring counties, but endemic poverty still shapes the lives of many living in Uasin Gishu.

My work consisted of two major phases: fieldwork followed by lab experiments. The goal of the fieldwork was to identify if the county of Uasin Gishu (where I was staying) had an endemic issue with aflatoxin in their corn. This included buying samples from farmers, traders, and local millers and testing them for aflatoxin levels. I worked closely with the local government, county extension officers, the Kenyan Agriculture and Livestock Research Organization (KALRO), private industry, and my host university to conduct the fieldwork. In the end, we ended up collecting 200 samples across two trials. In fact, the need for a second trial was critical to my understanding of bias in research and understanding certain cultural norms that affect such research, which I will elaborate on later in this piece. Finally, I ran lab experiments at the University of Eldoret's Food Process Training and Incubation Lab (FPTIC) to test if extrusion processing could rid contamination from aflatoxin-infected corn samples.

The FPTIC in Eldoret is the ideal place for conducting research related to food processing, nutrition, and safety. A picture of the FPTIC facility can be seen in Figure 2. The center is funded by the USAID Feed the Future initiative and includes two other training centers, one in the United States and another in Senegal. The purpose of the center is to “support and strengthen post-harvest value

chains in these to overcome constraints that cause food loss” (Feed the Future, 2020). The FPTIC, spearheaded by Dr. Violet Mugalavai, also serves as a training center for Kenyan university students looking to address food insecurity through technology and entrepreneurial training.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

This project provided and produced jobs for two Kenyan students at Kenyan grain companies, a report for the local government, a contribution to the local economy, and the potential for scholarly work with Kenyan research partners. These tangible outcomes are important and part of the larger influence of this project. In addition, this paper explores how the engagement between the researcher and the community partner(s) were the result of power and privilege dynamics. The primary engagement with the local community partner related to buying maize samples from farmers and conducting university research. Dr. Mugalavai and the local research assistant as well as KALRO recommended involving the local government in Uasin Gishu. These interactions between the researcher and the local government proved to be valuable learning experiences on how international research can have unintended consequences.

One example of a potentially negative impact is the prioritization of researcher needs over the needs of the community when engaging with local institutions. Our research team visited the Uasin Gishu county government office at the beginning of our fieldwork to receive permission to conduct research. Like many government offices around the globe, the Uasin Gishu County office is filled with lines and people waiting to have paperwork signed. Despite having no previous appointment scheduled, the team was immediately taken upstairs to meet with the Department of Agriculture staff. Within minutes, I was personally speaking with the subcounty agriculture officers. The staff were interested in the research and reiterated that they thought it could be of great benefit to the county. Shortly after, the team was offered face time with the head of the Department of Agriculture—even though we had been told upon arrival that his schedule was full of appointments that day. During our meeting, the department head gave his support for the research and offered the services of his officers and their insights regarding aflatoxin issues in the county. After about two hours, the team left the county offices with enough time to complete some fieldwork that same afternoon.

It is important to take note of the dynamics between the research team and local government officers. At first, the expedited meeting between the county team and



Figure 2. The Food Process Training and Incubation Centre at the University of Eldoret in Eldoret, Kenya.

the researchers could easily be attributed only to the association of our work with KALRO, which has worked extensively with the department in the past. While that may have been partially true, the impact of having a white, American researcher on the team should also be acknowledged. The history of international development lends itself to scenarios where foreigners, particularly those who are white and from developed countries, can simply approach a community with a potentially beneficial idea and—having ample money and capacity—conduct research. It follows that after years of foreign governments and organizations leading projects and providing funds for development, any foreigner claiming to be working on a project with the potential to help a particular community would be prioritized by local governments and given the privilege of conducting research with minimal resistance from the community members.

Such interactions as the one described have led to the normalization of international development groups and workers having their needs placed first. In the case of our interaction with the county government, the ability to skip lines and immediately receive attention from authorities could have exacerbated the preexisting inequalities between the local community and foreign researchers. The consequence of this action—and the actions of many researchers before me—is the internalized belief by local communities, authorities, and visiting researchers that money, assistance, and helpful ideas must move from developed to developing countries. Thus, rather than empowering developing countries, the historical and misguided mindset that progress can only be brought from hegemonic North to poor South persists.

As researchers seek to engage with local governments, a focus should be placed on more proactive and equitable engagement to eliminate negative community impact. One good practice is to learn more about government structure and protocol before approaching the government. This could have been done by asking Kenyan teammates to expand on their recommendations on how to work effectively with the local officers. Asking questions about standard protocol would also be beneficial. In the provided example, scheduling an appointment in advance or insisting that we wait in line could have reduced the physical appearance of our work taking priority. Additionally, researchers will benefit from recognizing the way personal identity and corresponding privilege can contribute to biased data. After recognizing that my presence during fieldwork led to biased sample collection (i.e., local farmers, seeing an American, white female, often provided higher quality grain), my team

and I chose to conduct a second trial where I was not present during the sample collection. Instead, a local Kenyan university student collected the samples, which increased local trust in the research, eliminated bias, and engaged the community in a more equitable way.

The detriments of power and privilege in international development work should be of great concern to researchers. Our project in Kenya was successful in that it provided some tangible benefits like job placement for two Kenyan researchers, but it is clear that some negative impacts occurred from misunderstanding the role of privilege when engaging with the local community. While many researchers have the best of intentions, this example illustrates that many consequences of international development research also go unaddressed and may even actively work against existing social justice initiatives. Students can balance the value of completing research (e.g., health and food safety benefits) in a timely fashion with improved social justice by taking the time to reflect personally on their privilege and how it impacts the local community. Such reflection should be followed by tangible action, such as changes in behavior, expectations, and even research methods. Ultimately, project success should be measured by the cultural/social impact of foreign research on a community in addition to the benefits of the research itself.

STUDENT IMPACT

As I reflected on my experiences in Kenya, I came to realize that some of the most difficult and confusing interactions I experienced were because of power and privilege dynamics that I was not recognizing. It is important to note that power and privilege are applied and play out differently in different parts of the world. One helpful tool to analyze such differences is Hofstede's Insights, which uses data on six intercultural descriptors to provide cultural insights on different countries around the world (Hofstede's Insights, 2020). A comparison of the United States and Kenya using Hofstede's insights can be seen in Figure 3. The six descriptors are power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence.

One of the most challenging things was understanding that power dynamics in Kenya operate differently than they do in the United States. The power structure in Kenya is unique in that it is a high power distance society (Hofstede's Insights, 2020). From my observations, this results in formal relationships between employers and employees. Academic and government institutions are also similarly formalized.

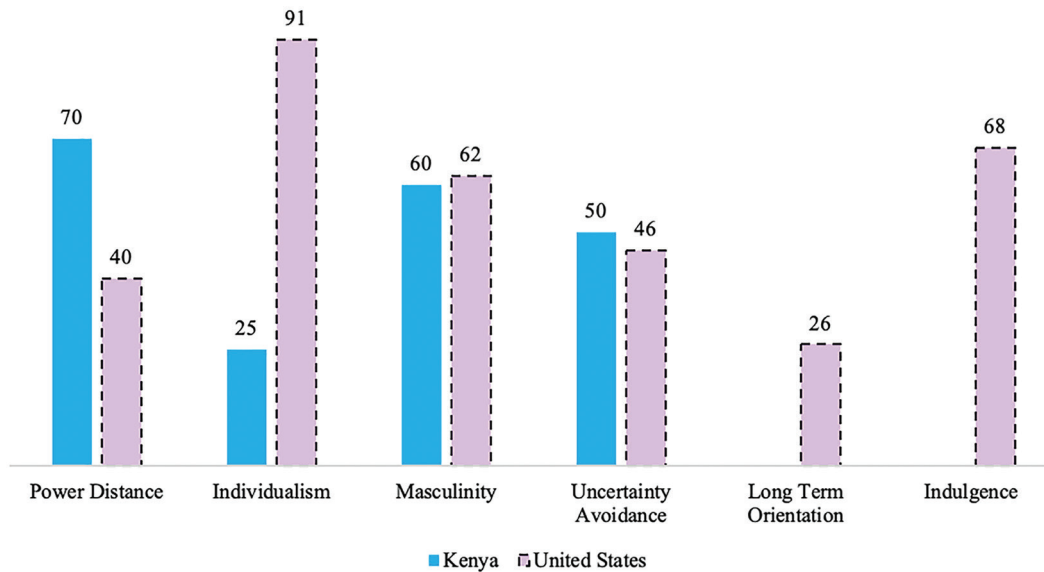


Figure 3. Hofstede's Insights comparing the United States and Kenya.

My presence as a white, American woman often disrupted the traditional hierarchy within my Kenyan team. Since I was responsible for the success of my project, I was often referred to as the “team leader.” For example, when conducting fieldwork, I made the decisions about which location we should travel to on a certain day. This also meant that I was responsible for all of the project’s finances, including transportation, equipment, and employment. While I had expected to pay for all the aforementioned costs, there was one thing I did not expect to pay for: lunch.

This sounds like a simple thing, but at the time paying for the lunch of my driver and research assistant was one of the most frustrating aspects of fieldwork. This frustration stems from other scenarios during my time in Kenya where random individuals would ask me for money. Given my blatant identity as a foreigner and the common practice of tourists giving away money, I knew this was not unusual. The high frequency of these occurrences further exacerbated my frustration in situations where I was incurring costs that I perceived were not part of my responsibility, such as lunch costs.

Something that helped me understand and work through this particular frustration was seeking the advice of a close Kenyan friend. After speaking with them, I realized that I needed to identify when, in the local Kenyan culture, someone with my authority should pay for certain things like lunch. I also became more observant and realized that even the professor I worked with often helped her students or lab employees with certain costs.

After these conversations and conscious observations, I began to feel less upset about buying lunch for the team even though this isn’t always traditional in American work settings. I also realized that my reaction toward my team was inherently biased and they were not seeking to take advantage of my project money as I initially thought.

Learning what to pay for—and what not to—is a complex part of conducting international development research. Most grant-funded international development projects include a budget that allows for various expenses. However, this budget is usually submitted and approved as part of the grant proposal. If you are not working closely with the international partner or if you are not aware of such cultural expectations by the time you submit the proposal, you may not be able to accommodate unforeseen expenses. Alternatively, if the success of your project is reliant upon such an unforeseen expense, you may have to reallocate funds to the detriment of other aspects of the project.

My role as team leader also became difficult when I needed to make decisions that required more local knowledge. For example, there were certain cases where my knowledge of the county environment made it difficult for me to decide where we should travel on a certain day. Thus, I would often rely on my Kenyan research assistant to provide their insight during these scenarios. Yet, it was often difficult to determine what my research assistant thought was the most appropriate decision. They would often refer to me and say that we

could “do whatever I think is best.” This resulted in my making decisions that delayed the research, extending the timeline from a few days to a couple of weeks. This is particularly detrimental when you are working within the constraints of planting and harvesting seasons. In one instance, I made the choice to collect samples from a region where farmers had already begun to harvest their corn. This meant that many farmers were preoccupied in the field and unable to meet with us to sell us corn samples. With limited time in Kenya, I began to feel frustrated about the pace of the project.

I continued to ask for the advice of my research assistant, but was still having trouble with finding the appropriate farmers from whom to collect samples. After reflecting on this, I realized that they often provided vague recommendations because they did not want to offend my authority. To amend this situation and get the project back on track, I began to change my language and tone when communicating with my research assistant. Instead of asking, “What should we do?” I began to ask more framing questions such as, “Where are farmers harvesting today? Is there a better time for us to start conducting fieldwork? What do you think the weather in this region will be?” From these answers, I could interpret what my assistant thought was best to do, rather than forcing them to explicitly tell me.

Understanding my role of team leader in this context also points to deficits in my understanding of Kenyan cultural norms. My ability to ask better questions and communicate more effectively came only after consulting Kenyan friends and delving into the intricacies of intercultural differences between Americans and Kenyans. While visiting researchers cannot be expected to know everything prior to conducting work in any foreign country, in-depth intercultural training is critical for an improved relationship on intercultural teams. The combination of well-trained visiting researchers and effective teamwork with local researchers contributes to project success.

It still took me time and reflection to work through the challenges I faced with my Kenyan team and in the Kenyan context. My familiarity with the facets of intercultural development, including awareness of others, awareness of self, and emotional resilience, helped me overcome many of these challenges to conduct a successful research project. From my personal experience, I would recommend that students actively pursue training in these areas at least six months before going abroad for a long-term project. This includes basic

language learning, intercultural workshops, consulting with friends or colleagues who have traveled to the same location, and making connections with your host country team.

CONCLUSION

As more students seek to engage in international development research, it is critical that we begin asking ourselves questions about for whom—and if—such an exchange is beneficial. Power and privilege in international development work is a very complex topic that cannot possibly be fully discussed within the confines of this short essay. Additionally, it is important to note that my standpoint is one of a white, female, able-bodied, American woman. A standpoint should be viewed “not [as] a given and finalized form of knowledge, but as a ground in experience from which discoveries [can] be made” (Ngo, 2013; Smith, 2005). My main takeaway from my time in Kenya is that factors like social justice, intersectionality, and intercultural competence—which go beyond technical expertise—can dramatically influence the success of international projects. In the future, I plan to use the insights to guide my future work in international food security. Additionally, is my hope that these insights provide insight for those interested in global service-learning and improve the understanding of student researchers on the role of power and privilege dynamics in international development research.

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